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AUTOSCAPE:

The Automobile
in the American
Landscape

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American Landscape

Whitney Museum of American Art,
Fairfield County

March 30—May 30, 1984

Cover:
Allan D'Arcangelo, *Highway U.S 1, No. 3,* 1963
Acrylic on canvas, 69½ x 81 (176.5 x 205.7)
Collection of Sydney and Frances Lewis

By 1897, just four years after Frank Duryea tested a one-cylinder carriage on the back streets of Springfield, Massachusetts, the auto industry was established in this country. Eleven years later, Henry Ford began assembly-line production of his Model-T and car sales soared. From the beginning, the automobile matched the American desire for independence, freedom, speed, and mobility. In addition to the convenience it provided in day-to-day living, the automobile afforded people the opportunity to travel more often to explore the vast country in which they lived. By the 1920s, the car had become central to the American way of life. Not only was it the best available means of transportation, but it played a vital part in shaping the ''American dream.''

As more and more people took to the road, the landscape changed accordingly. Countless miles of land have been paved over, and gas stations, restaurants, and motels have proliferated along the highways to service the needs of the car and the traveler. New businesses, such as fast-food chains, have flourished in response to our increasingly mobile society and the demand for quick, convenient roadside service. Furthermore, traditional institutions have been modified to accommodate transportation by car: drive-in banks, restaurants, and movie theaters now allow people to remain in the comfort and privacy of their own automobiles. Other auto-related structures have intruded on the landscape as well—multistory parking garages, suburban shopping malls, used-car lots, and auto graveyards, to name just a few. Indeed, the automobile has to a large extent determined the look of our landscape.

We get a glimpse of how the early autoscape was perceived from Benton Spruance's *Road from the Shore* (1936), a graphic portrayal of cars speeding home, with the image of death looming in the night sky. Aaron Bohrod's *Landscape Near Chicago* (1934) is one of the earliest depictions of an auto junkyard. John Gutmann, a German-born photographer, was fascinated with American advertisements. During the 1930s, he turned his camera on this particular element of American culture and, in the process, produced memorable records of the car.

Edward Hopper was one artist who regularly painted highway-related scenes. His frequent trips around the country with his wife, Jo, provided him with his subject matter—gas stations, diners, motel rooms, and roadways. In *Four Lane Road* (1956), Hopper deliberately focuses on the loneliness of an isolated roadside gas station. The owner, seemingly oblivious to his wife beckoning at the window, waits expectantly for customers who may never materialize.

Like Hopper, Robert Frank also chooses to concentrate on the psychological qualities engendered by life on the road. In 1955–56, Frank traveled around the country, taking photographs he later published in a book entitled *The Americans*. The photographs displayed here, selected from that project, interpret the experience of traveling as one of dislocation and of human anonymity within landscapes and architecture created for the automobile.

Pop artists of the early 1960s, in their avid desire to transform the elements of popular culture into ''fine art,'' often made the highway itself the subject of their works. Among the features of the rapidly expanding highway system in America were the road signs and billboards that provided directions or urged the driver to eat someplace, purchase something, or stop somewhere for entertainment. Allan D'Arcangelo's *Highway U.S. 1, No.3* (1963) is one of a series of five paintings in which the presence of the driver is

implicit. By using a one-point perspective he creates the illusion of a driver speeding along the highway. The familiar Sunoco emblem and U.S. Highway 1 sign are the only interruptions in an altogether undifferentiated landscape.

Robert Indiana borrows the format and colors of a railroad crossing sign, indicating caution, for his painting *U.S.A. 666* (1964–66). The title has numerous implications: a single six refers to his father's birth month, June; a double six recalls the Phillips 66 sign of the gasoline company his father worked for and Route 66, the highway that crosses America from east to west; a triple six signifies "Use 666," the advertisement for a common cold remedy.[1] Add to it the commands "EAT," "HUG," "ERR," and "DIE," and the result is a complex, personalized message system that alerts the viewer to the dangers of both the real road and the figurative road of life.

In 1962, Edward Ruscha published a book of photographs he had taken of *Twenty-Six Gas Stations*. He subsequently used a Standard Oil station as the subject of several paintings and prints. His choice of the company name draws attention to the standardization inherent in popular culture, of which the highway is a prime example. Everything about it, from the roadside architecture to the experience of driving itself is commonplace and repetitive. D'Arcangelo, Indiana, and Ruscha all use a style of painting—hard edges with flat, unmodulated areas of color—that is analogous to the surface of a freshly paved road. The graphic quality of their images and the large scale of their works also echo the billboards and signs seen along the highway.

James Rosenquist and Tom Wesselmann are equally influenced by the size of billboards. Rosenquist, who had actually worked as a billboard painter, favors intriguing juxtapositions and inversions of scale in all of his images. In *Highway* (1977), a gelatinous, food-like substance resembling frozen custard is being poured into the front seat of a car, conjuring up memories of fast-food drive-in restaurants. In Tom Wesselmann's *Landscape #5* (1965), a life-size, illusionistically rendered vehicle stands not in front of a landscape but in front of a painting of a landscape. In this twice-removed setting, the red Volkswagen overwhelms the depicted spread of blue sky.

In *Saturday Disaster* (1964), Andy Warhol wryly comments on the way in which the media affect our responses. The all-too-familiar image of a fatal car accident is repeated on the upper and lower halves of the canvas; the duplication achieves the same anesthetizing effect that repeated press coverage has on the public's consciousness. Warhol's choice of the silk-screen process as his working method is itself a form of mass production. Moreover, the resulting images are reminiscent of the granular quality of newspaper print and television pictures.

John Chamberlain's work exemplifies the Pop aesthetic: he transforms junked auto body parts into sculpture. By combining pieces of varying sizes, shapes, and colors, he creates surprisingly beautiful works. Although the final forms are decidedly abstract, the source of the materials remains obvious.

A group of painters represented here belong to the school known as Photo-Realism. John Baeder, Robert Bechtle, Ralph Goings, Don Eddy, and John Salt have

1. Indiana itemized these allusions in *Robert Indiana*, exhibition catalogue (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania, 1968), p. 29.

borrowed heavily from the automobile culture for their extraordinarily realistic imagery. Working from photographs, these artists create in paint the kind of precise, detailed compositions normally associated only with photography. Like images frozen in time by a camera lens, these paintings are devoid of any implication of speed or motion. And several of the photographers in the exhibition—including Joel Meyerowitz, Roger Minick, Stephen Shore, and Eve Sonneman—focus on settings and perspectives similar to those of the Photo-Realists. But whereas the photographers highlight atmospheric conditions, which lend a subjective character to their works, the Photo-Realists eliminate all modulation of light as they strive for an impersonal, objectified vision.

Unlike the works of most Photo-Realists, Bechtle's paintings often include people, but people whose importance is consistently overshadowed by the presence of a vehicle. Indeed, he always titles his paintings after the vehicles portrayed in them. *'61 Pontiac* (1968–69) is an up-to-date version of the old family portrait theme. What makes this portrait modern—and American—is that Mom, Dad, and the children are posed in front of what is probably the family's most prized possession—the automobile.

The American autoscape continues to be a provocative subject for artists. Recent works by Roger Brown, Yvonne Jacquette, and Wayne Thiebaud offer dramatic aerial views of congested urban and rural roadways. Whether or not the works in this exhibition are intended as criticisms of our automobile culture is for the viewer to decide. There is no doubt, however, that the images encourage us to take a fresh look at the autoscape that surrounds us.

Pamela Gruninger Perkins
Manager, Fairfield County

Selected Bibliography

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Blake, Peter. *God's Own Junkyard.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

The Highway (exhibition catalogue). Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania, 1970.

Lewis, David L., and Laurence Goldstein, eds. *The Automobile and American Culture.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983.

Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1977.

Wreck: A Tragic-Romantic American Theme (exhibition catalogue). Canton, Ohio: The Canton Art Institute, 1974.

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are given first in
inches, then in centimeters;
height precedes width precedes
depth.

Berenice Abbott (b. 1898)
Gasoline Station at Tenth Avenue and 29th Street, Manhattan,
*   December 23, 1935*, 1935
Gelatin silver print, 13 x 10½ (33 x 26.7)
The Witkin Gallery, Inc., New York

American Shops, New Jersey, July 30, 1954, 1954
Gelatin silver print, 7½ x 9½ (19 1 x 24 1)
The Witkin Gallery, Inc , New York

Robert Adams (b 1937)
Looking Toward Los Angeles Across San Timoteo Canyon,
*   San Bernadino County, California, 1978*, 1978
Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 (27.9 x 35.6)
Marvin Heiferman, New York

John Baeder (b 1938)
Stardust Motel, 1977
Oil on canvas, 58 x 70 (147.3 x 177.8)
Collection of Richard Brown Baker, courtesy Yale University
    Art Gallery, New Haven

Robert Bechtle (b. 1932)
'61 Pontiac, 1968- 69
Oil on canvas, 60 x 84¼ (152.4 x 214)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Richard and
    Dorothy Rodgers Fund   70.16

Aaron Bohrod (b. 1907)
Landscape Near Chicago, 1934
Oil on composition board, 24 x 32 (61 x 81.3)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase   34 13

Richard Bosman (b 1944)
Car Crash, 1982
Oil on canvas, 66 x 84 (167 6 x 213.4)
Brooke Alexander, Inc., New York

Roger Brown (b. 1941)
Mustangs and Mishaps, 1978–79
Oil on canvas, 52 x 72 (132.1 x 182.9)
Collection of Douglas and Carol Cohen

Harry Callahan (b. 1912)
Detroit, 1943, 1943
Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 (27.9 x 35.6)
Zabriskie Gallery, New York

Chicago, c. 1949
Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 (25.4 x 20.3)
Zabriskie Gallery, New York

John Chamberlain (b. 1927)
Jackpot, 1962
Metal and gold paper, 60 x 52 x 46 (152.4 x 132.1 x 116 8)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of
    Andy Warhol   75 52

Christo (b. 1935)
Closed Highway, Project for a 5,000 Mile, 6 Lane, East-West
*   Highway*, 1969
Collage: pencil, Photostat, and Plexiglas on paper, 28 x 22
    (71 1 x 55.9)
Collection of Jeanne-Claude Christo

Davis Cone (b. 1950)
Martin, 1980
Acrylic on canvas, 35½ x 47½ (90 2 x 120.7)
Collection of Marvin and Heidi Trachtenberg

Allan D'Arcangelo (b. 1930)
Highway U.S. 1, No. 3, 1963
Acrylic on canvas, 69½ x 81 (176.5 x 205.7)
Collection of Sydney and Frances Lewis

Don Eddy (b. 1944)
Private Parking #X, 1971
Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 95 (167 6 x 241.3)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs Monroe Meyerson

John Falter (b. 1910)
Changing Shifts, 1959
Oil on canvas, 23½ x 35½ (59.7 x 90.2)
Alfred P. Sloan Jr Museum, Flint, Michigan

Andreas Feininger (b. 1906)
Rush Hour, Westside Highway, New York, 1951
Gelatin silver print, 12 x 10¾ (30.5 x 27.3)
Daniel Wolf, Inc., New York

Robert Frank (b. 1924)
Sante Fe, New Mexico, 1955–56
Gelatin silver print, 9¼₆ x 13¼ (23 x 33.7)
Private collection

U.S. 285, New Mexico, 1955–56
Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 (27.9 x 35.6)
Private collection

Lee Friedlander (b. 1934)
New York City, 1973, 1973
Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 (27.9 x 35.6)
Zabriskie Gallery, New York

Ralph Goings (b. 1928)
Burger Chef, 1970
Oil on canvas, 40 x 56 (101.6 x 142.2)
Private collection

John Gutmann (b. 1905)
First Drive-In Theatre, Los Angeles, 1935, 1935
Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 (20.3 x 25.4)
Castelli Graphics, New York

Elevator Garage, Chicago, 1936, 1936
Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 (25.4 x 20.3)
Castelli Graphics, New York

"Switch to Dodge," Detroit, 1936, 1936
Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 (20.3 x 25.4)
Castelli Graphics, New York

"Yes, Columbus Did Discover America," San Francisco, 1938, 1938
Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 (27.9 x 35.6)
Castelli Graphics, New York

Edward Hopper (1882–1967)
Four Lane Road, 1956
Oil on canvas, 27½ x 41½ (69.9 x 105.4)
Private collection

Robert Indiana (b. 1928)
U.S.A 666, 1964–66
Oil on canvas, 102 x 102 (259.1 x 259.1)
Collection of the artist

Yvonne Jacquette (b. 1934)
Sixth Avenue Rush, Rainy Night II, 1983
Charcoal and pastel on paper, 52¾ x 45 (134 x 114.3)
Brooke Alexander, Inc., New York

Joe Maloney (b. 1949)
Maywood, New Jersey, 1978, 1978
Ektacolor print, 16 x 20 (40.6 x 50.8)
Light Gallery, New York

Joel Meyerowitz (b. 1938)
Provincetown, 1976
Ektacolor print, 16 x 20 (40.6 x 50.8)
Grapestake Gallery, San Francisco

Red Interior, Provincetown, 1977
Ektacolor print, 16 x 20 (40.6 x 50.8)
Grapestake Gallery, San Francisco

Roger Minick (b. 1944)
Southern California, 1974
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 (40.6 x 50.8)
Grapestake Gallery, San Francisco

Southern California, 1975
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 (40.6 x 50.8)
Grapestake Gallery, San Francisco

Southern California, 1976
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 (40.6 x 50.8)
Grapestake Gallery, San Francisco

James Rosenquist (b. 1933)
Highway, 1977
Oil on canvas, 60 x 144 (152.4 x 365.8)
Collection of Barbara and Morris Miller

Edward Ruscha (b. 1937)
Double Standard, 1969
Serigraph, 25¾ x 40 (65.4 x 101.6)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
    Gift of Paul J Schupf 70.22

John Salt (b. 1937)
Purple Impala, 1973
Oil on canvas, 43¼ x 64 (110.5 x 162 6)
Collection of Marilyn and Ivan Karp

Stephen Shore (b 1947)
Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California.
    June 21, 1975, 1975
Ektacolor print, 16 x 20 (40 6 x 50.8)
Light Gallery, New York

SITE
Documentary photographs of a site sculpture, *Ghost Parking Lot*
    (Hamden, Connecticut), 1978
Composite of gelatin silver prints, 36 x 36 (91 4 x 91 4)
SITE, New York

Eve Sonneman (b. 1946)
The Land/The Moon, Rio Pecos, New Mexico, 1978, 1978
Two Cibachrome prints, 8 x 10 (20 3 x 25.4) each
Castelli Graphics, New York

Benton Spruance (1904–1967)
Road from the Shore, 1936
Lithograph, 13⅜ x 18⁵⁄₁₆ (34 x 48 1)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of Mr and Mrs
    Raymond J Learsy   82.2.5

The People Work—Evening, 1937
Lithograph, 15⅞ x 22¾ (40.3 x 57 8)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of Mr and Mrs.
    Raymond J Learsy   82 2.3

Saul Steinberg (b. 1914)
Garden State Parkway, 1977
Watercolor and colored pencil on paper, 13¾ x 21¼ (34 9 x 54 6)
Pace Gallery, New York

State Line Motel, 1978
Colored pencil on paper, 14 x 22½ (35.6 x 57.2)
Pace Gallery, New York

Wayne Thiebaud (b. 1920)
Interchange, 1979
Oil on canvas, 29⅞ x 26¹⁵⁄₁₆ (75.9 x 68 4)
Collection of The Southland Corporation, Dallas

Ernest Trova (b. 1927)
Study/Falling Man, 1966, 1966
Silicon bronze, 21 x 78½ x 31 (53.3 x 199 4 x 78.7)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of Howard and
    Jean Lipman   67 12

Andy Warhol (b 1925)
Saturday Disaster, 1964
Oil silkscreen on canvas, 118⅞ x 81⅞ (301 9 x 208)
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts;
    Gevirtz-Mnuchin Purchase Fund, by exchange

Tom Wesselmann (b. 1931)
Landscape #5, 1965
Oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas, 84 x 150 x 18 (213.4 x 381 x 45.7)
Collection of the artist

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